Platform politics

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Platform Politics: Sport Events and the Affordances of Digital and Social Media

Abstract

In this paper I reflect on the role of digital and social media in the production, consumption and circulation of messages about major (and mega) sport events, drawing on research into digital cultures and events over the last decade. I argue that the mass availability of everyday digital devices and social platforms transforms the way that both producers and consumers contest prevailing major event narratives. Whilst, on one hand, the corporate-sport-media complex can use the event platform effectively, to extract value for sport event consumers there is also growing evidence that these same platforms can be hijacked by opposing interests and the prevailing event narrative can be altered, at least temporarily.

Introduction

In this paper I focus on the specific affordances of digital and social media as they relate to sport events, but this discussion cannot take place without considering the broader impacts of the digital turn on the landscape of sport over the last two decades, in particular. Given its promotional rhetoric, there is a temptation to suggest that digital and social media represent a complete break, or rupture, from existing practices of media production, distribution and circulation. However, I argue here that more fluid boundaries now exist between new and mainstream media as each extends reach into the others' territory. For example, participants, fans or consumers of sport now regularly access team websites, user generated online content, and social media interactions as important sources of information, especially when the mainstream media are only able to provide limited coverage of niche sporting interests. That is not to say that broadcast, or legacy media, has lost its power to influence our experience (s) of sport. In fact, consumers may now be consuming more sport (Rowe, 2014) but doing so alongside their ''second screens'' to the primary broadcast via television (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 4).

These 'new' media practices are not restricted to the field of sport but are representative of a more generalised cultural shift. Defining social media as "the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms…that allow participants to create and share their own content", boyd (2014, p.6) suggests that there is a new cultural mindset (especially amongst teenagers)

associated with the creation, circulation and distribution of digital and social media content (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; Gauntlett, 2011) - affecting the sport world as much as other spheres of social life. Some of the principal differences associated with advances in digital and social media include its spreadability (boyd, 2014), its openness to remixing and reframing (Jenkins *et al* 2009), its participatory and creative potential (Gauntlett, 2011) and, crucially, its ability to lower thresholds for involvement in 'making' media and sharing it (Gauntlett, 2011). Digital and social media afford a set of new practices and pedagogies that can complement, and add to, existing media consumption behaviours (e.g. second screen activity on multiple devices). By way of an example, social media platforms (e.g. Twitter or Facebook) provide potentially greater visibility for individuals, groups and companies but they also capture and commercialise what I call the digital residue, meaning that those producing content are open to the vagaries of governmental and corporate surveillance that can have deleterious effects especially as "the 'collective allotment' of Web 2.0 space…is not collectively owned" (Gauntlett, 2011, p.212). It is becoming clearer that engagement in online activity, apparently liberating, is not without its consequences as transnational corporations (including sport teams and their sponsors) involve users (e.g. fans) in the production of experiences that can ultimately be translated into commercial return without these users receiving any reward for their labour (Fuchs, 2014).

In the context of sport and sport cultures, the proliferation of digital and social media activity has enabled fans, athletes and teams to communicate together instantaneously, reflective of an accelerated information order (Hutchins, 2011). These changes have implications for both producers (athletes, sports clubs, sport governing bodies, sport journalists) and consumers (fans, participants, members) as interactions and conversations are networked in two-way dialogue and exchange as opposed to the more 'controlled' logic of broadcast models. In the remainder of this paper, I briefly describe the trends in sport media that impact on the production and consumption of sporting experiences, before turning to the specific ways in which sport event media platforms provide sanctioning bodies, host organisers and the corporate-sport-media-complex with a mechanism to communicate their preferential narratives. I then highlight how those holding oppositional perspectives can also exploit the affordances of digital and social media to seize or hijack the event platform to advance their own, contrary, objectives. Drawing on two practice-research case studies to illustrate the power of networked online platforms to project alternative narratives of major events, I conclude by arguing that the possibility of opposing or resisting the imposition of

institutional sport event narratives is stronger now than at any time. However, the power of digital and social media as an oppositional force remains fragile, threatened by an increasingly adept established media who are becoming more effective at harnessing social media and other online environments whilst retaining their position as primary definers of the media message.

Sport and new (er) media

Burchell (2015) suggests that the prevailing direction of sport media is towards greater commercialisation online, with major sport event sanctioning bodies incorporating the potential challenge to their existing business model brought by digital and social media (blogging, photo sharing, livestreaming) to multiply the ways that sport consumers can spend their money in ever more experiential ways. Filo, Lock & Karg (2014) reinforce this message, contending that in relation to sport, the emphasis has tended to be on the strategic role and function of social media from an organisational perspective, including how teams and organising bodies think about their interactions with their various stakeholders. However, Filo et al (2014) also identify operational (the use by sports organisations) and user-focused (e.g. fan motivation for use and user profiling) research, concluding that there is a strong emphasis on communication, relationship development and brand promotion (Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2013). This literature reinforces that social media is viewed by many sport organisations as simply an efficient and effective means of achieving commercial objectives, although there is some recognition of the interactive possibilities that social media affords (Brodie, Ilic, Juric & Hollebeek, 2013). Brodie et al (2013) suggest that social media engagement and use by sport organisations can produce positive psychological outcomes but that there remains a need to know more about different user preferences and the reception of social media messages by different individuals and groups. There is also evidence of a growing number of elite sport organisations using social media to develop more sophisticated forms of marketing and advertising, enhanced brand sponsorship and to grow audiences (O'Sheah & Alonso, 2011; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Bruns, Weller & Harrington, 2014). The focus of the activities of sport organisations here is to push content out to existing and new markets with social media playing a crucial role in marketing and communication approaches, often complementing rather than replacing more traditional media techniques (Vann, 2014).

Other scholars have also suggested that social media also represent an opportunity for smaller organisations and those with less plentiful financial and human resources. Bruns et al (2014), for example, in their research on Twitter use by soccer clubs in different regions found that the Australian A-League clubs at all levels had been successful in their attempts to "leverage the social network's possibilities for the promotion of the A-League to a larger audience" (p.278). As Vann (2014) comments, "sports which are marginalized in mainstream media are more likely to take advantage of the opportunities presented by social media platforms" (p.442). In sporting contexts then, digital and social media have been viewed predominantly as a marketing and communications tool, enabling sports organisations (producers) to reach out to wider audiences (consumers). The intention is to maximise commercial return from generating additional fan loyalty and engagement and in securing greater 'fan' involvement in the activities of clubs or organisations. In this sense, digital and social media may simply represent another vehicle to broadcast carefully crafted messages and activate commercial propositions, speaking directly to target audiences and bypassing traditional media intermediaries in the process.

Sport events and the (media) platform

The relationship between sports events and their media effects has been the subject of intense debate in recent years (Waitt, 1999; Hutchins & Mikosza, 2012). Technology has, for some time been implicated in the development and global mediation of mega sport events, most evidently in the cases of the Olympic Games and the soccer World Cup:

> The history of international broadcasting can be traced through successive Olympic Games as moments where technological developments and new heights of collective viewership collide with the motivations of national governments and transnational actors (Gillespie & O'Loughlin, 2015, p.391)

Many of the broadcast techniques we take for granted were trialled at mega sport events (e.g. TV) and, from the 1980s onwards, sport events themselves became viewed as profitable, capital accumulating spectacles, becoming saleable commodities (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2002) largely through their interaction with media. Mega sport events are now inseparable from their mediated form which is dominated by the influence of a rights-owning media industry that generates significant riches for the event owners (Horne & Whannel, 2010). The media

landscape of major sport events is dominated by accredited media, sponsors and strict media guidelines (Miah & Garcia, 2012), designed to manage the message carefully and ensure the hoped-for international profile for both the sanctioning body and the host city is protected. After all, "global media events offer a nexus of attention sought after by the political and economic actors through which they can gain credibility, prestige and authority" (Gillespie & O'Loughlin, 2015, p.394). In essence, sport events are the archetypal media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992) of our age as they provide endless opportunities to project a destinations' image to the watching world building on partnerships with a mainstream media that are signed up early (at the bid stage) to promote the benefits of the event for the host destination (see Waitt, 1999; Shaw, 2008). Since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, major sport events have become ever more dependent on income derived from being able to sell sports broadcasting rights.

Beyond the income accrued for the IOC, FIFA and other event sanctioning bodies (Eick, 2010), major sport events have also become effective platforms for a range of other (often non-sporting) ambitions to be realised. Price (2008) defines the *platform* as "any mechanism that allows for the presentation of information and its transmission from a sender to receiver…platforms that exist physically, in the electronic universe or simply as the relationships or links between various entities" (p.87). For Price, the platform can be used by those looking to present and communicate their messages (e.g. the host city, sanctioning body or sponsor) as well as those contesting dominant narratives by 'seizing' the platform for their own ends. In terms of major sports events, host organisers and their sanctioning body partners make strenuous attempts to prevent any hijacking of their assets (whether a venue, a logo or a phrase). For example, in order to protect Olympic sponsors from the so-called free riders or ambush marketers eager to benefit from association with a powerful brand, exceptional legislation must be passed in each host city to ensure these activities are outlawed and, even more importantly, policed. The same approach is now common practice in other large events, where host organisers facilitate privileged access to captive audiences for sponsors to enable successful brand activation. These strategies and tactics are possible because of the requirement (enshrined in contractual law) that host nations relinquish control over their own national sovereignty in respect of planning legislation (McGillivray & McPherson, 2012). A series of apparently mundane regulatory adjustments are enshrined in the host city contracts - including who counts as 'media' and what you can say - that both enables (e.g. profit generation) and constrains (e.g. movement, flow and freedom of speech).

In recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of both the physical and virtual spaces where brand activation can occur, including civic buildings (projecting logos and advertisements on iconic architecture), specially-created event zones (e.g. live sites, fan parks and live zones), websites, and even extending to whole nations through the travelling torch relays that accompany the Olympic Games, for example. In the case of the soccer World Cup, Eick (2010) has argued that, "the influx of FIFA on regulating the urban space as a market and commodity already raises concern about the democratic conditions of the commonweal before and during these four weeks of a mega-event" (p. 293). Elsewhere, Frew and McGillivray (2013) have argued that torch relay routes are increasingly open to commercial exploitation so that the original ethos of the event (peace, friendship and unity) is overridden by the need to ensure the brand activation strategies of sponsors are given precedence, to the extent that, "institutionally engineered experiences are choreographed for the benefit of national and international media, leaving citizens as passive bystanders, performing their pre-conceived role as flag wavers and raucous cheerleaders for corporate sponsors" (p.232). Because they are mobile and geographically dispersed, the relay events provide organisers with an opportunity to reach out to large audiences. Host organisers also view them as a defining moment when pre-Games negativity associated with cost overruns give way to a positive wave of enthusiasm for the mega sport event. In this sense, the relay is one symbolic (and commercial) mechanism that allows the transmission of harmonious values at the heart of Olympic rhetoric.

The focus on using the event platform to advance commercial imperatives has been subject to extensive critique by those studying the mega sport event phenomenon from different disciplinary perspectives, including urban studies, human geography, and sport and leisure studies. For example, Pavoni (2010) has suggested that mega sport events enable and intensify urban brandscaping and Gaffney (2015) also highlights that in the urban centres that invariably host major sporting events, circulatory networks are enabled (partly through building infrastructures) to enhance accumulation possibilities – for hosts and the event partners alike. In his work on Brazil's entry into the mega sport event terrain, he argues that those with the right levels of mobile capital are circulated through urban space to ensure they pass through consumption zones designed to extract value – commensurate with urban entrepreneurial state strategies.

Smith (2015) has also recently highlighted how whole cities are now being reconfigured as event 'venues'. Using the example of London in the lead up to, and after, the 2012 Olympic Games, Smith argues that there are controversial outcomes associated with previously commonly-owned civic spaces, like parks and squares being turned into venues – especially when these are subject to privatisation and securitisation processes. Weber-Neuth (2014), drawing on the case of 'adiZones' (urban gyms sponsored by Adidas) suggests that these illustrate the aggressive corporatisation of public space, as these zones operated as a branding exercise for Adidas using the Olympic legacy narrative as a neutralising force. In the name of animating the urban brandscape, critical commentators view such practices as easing the means of consumption, drawing more facets of urban life into the sphere of neo-liberalised, capital accumulation logic. There is evidence of even more active attempts by governments, sport federations and the main event sanctioning bodies (e.g. FIFA and the IOC) to lock down access to the physical spaces around major event venues and sites as control of these, "provides an extended and militarized media infrastructure for constructing and protecting the global narrative extending beyond the event and the success of the event itself" (Burchell, 2015, p. 659). So, whilst commentators stress the opportunities that exist for digital and social media platforms to flatten out hierarchies, contest power relations and open up a cacophony of voices that permit marginalised interests to bypass the mainstream media, there are powerful interests at play that continue to control, constrain and co-opt. Yet, as audiences are enabled to watch and participate in shaping sport and sporting events using different devices in numerous spaces, dominant narratives are always fragile, precarious and temporary. The liveness that digital and social media enable can allow for instant communication and sharing of contrary messages that challenge the established media arc around major sporting events.

Hijacking the sport event (media) platform

Whilst there are certainly prevailing power relationships that mean event narratives are controllable by political and economic power elites associated with the accumulation strategies of growth coalitions and their contemporaries, there also exists, in an age of digital and social media, the opportunity to hijack the platform (Price 2008). All mega events of recent times have had well organised oppositional groups, using alternative media platforms and circulating messages through social media to challenge the public relations practices of host organisers and their media partners. For proponents, these new (er) forms of media

provide the conditions of possibility through which the sport event media frame can be disrupted. Dominant sport event messages about economic, social, cultural and environmental legacies are no longer uncontested and controllable as "in an increasingly participatory media ecology…the unfolding of media logic is networked across actors and practices" (Aslan, Dennis & O'Loughlin, 2015, p.578). Controlling the sport event message is increasingly difficult as established media strategies collide with the networking capacity of web 2.0 and the popularity of social software to communicate alternative readings of events quickly (McGillivray, 2014). In terms of scale, major sporting events are, undeniably, a social media festival, with audience interactions around the 2012 London Olympics earning it the title of the first Social Media Olympics (Miah, 2012). Each major sporting event since 2010 has claimed to be the biggest and best social media occasion and the statistics suggest that the flow and circulation of tweets, likes and vines is growing exponentially (Gillespie and O'Loughlin, 2015). A good example of this unfolding of media logic is that, during the London 2012 Olympics there was a controversial storyline when the Chinese swimmer, Ye Shiwen, won the 400-metre medley race and was immediately linked with doping by the BBC's presenter Clare Balding. The controversy that then unfolded demonstrates how media coverage is multi-factorial, from TV to the internet, to catch up sites and through social media and back again. They suggest that:

> complex entanglements…occur between different media platforms within a hybrid media system, as tweets that were formed by an active audience during a live broadcast formed the foundation of an article by a news organisation two days later (Aslan, Dennis & O'Loughlin, 2015, p.590)

The affordances of digital and social media enable a wider range of actors to participate in discussion around sporting events and the broader political, social, economic and cultural issues that they bring sharply into focus – including those related to geo-politics, human rights, cultural diplomacy as well as the sporting competition itself – that are brought together for debate across media platforms:

> When traditional media are challenged to accommodate and compete with new media…the full realization of technological potential is no longer solely the domain of broadcasters: activists, citizens and spectators now have the tools to potentially sustain and/or mobilize public sentiment (Burchell, 2015, p.661)

As Allan (2013) has suggested, enhanced connectivity facilitates a citizen witnessing which potentially dilutes the role of established media organisations in "describing the world to those that inhabit it" (Rowe, 2014, p.755), providing a space open to dissent, protest, opposition and negative sentiment. Since the 2000 Sydney Olympics, in particular (Lenskyj, 2010), there has been a growing presence around mega sport events of unaccredited, independent or alternative media. Partly due to the changing media landscape that places smartphone mobile devices in the hands of a greater proportion of the population, internationally (Pew Research, 2016) and the emergence of DIY/maker culture online (Atton, 2014) users can create and consume media that can be circulated to a networked public (boyd, 2014) thirsty for interactions. Noticeable in this shift is a democratisation of access and ability (less need for technical proficiency) accompanied by an ease of sharing and interacting with the (still) powerful media producers. In the sporting context, Rowe (2014) has suggested that the "accelerated availability of devices and ways of connecting them" (p.753) intensifies competition for 'eyeballs' – whether by sports organisations or tourism agencies. Sport spectators (in various mediated spaces) now make their own media texts for Twitter, Facebook and the like to communicate their experiences in real time. These new possibilities are inseparable from the developments in personal communication devices that "provide spectators, citizens and activists with the tools to record, disseminate media and communicate with countless global others from within the limited geographical space of the media event" (Burchell, 2015, p.662).

The emergence of the citizen journalist or high profile activists in 'rupturing' the celebratory media event at Sochi 2014 (e.g. Pussy Riot) provides a good example of how opposition, dissent and protest is possible and can, albeit not universally, secure significant mainstream media traction when the affordances of digital and social media enable reach to significant audiences. On one hand, hosting the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics enabled Russia to enact laws, restrictions and other manoeuvres to restrict dissent and implement an Olympic Charter ban on political protest in Games venues and sites. Redevelopment of the city was accompanied by the introduction of advanced technological and communication infrastructures that became:

> the vehicle for the state security apparatus to build one of most sophisticated surveillance complexes to date, which monitored and filtered all mediated interpersonal communication

> taking place during the Sochi Olympics…the state and the IOC who organised the Games can assert a degree of control over the mediated narrative emanating from the event and extending beyond it (Burchell, 2015, p.664)

Yet, using everyday digital technologies, Pussy Riot, a Russian performance art group with a significant social media following, internationally, seized the Olympic platform through infiltrating the media event's physical space and engaging in 'asymmetrical' hijacking' (small groups creating big impacts) and sousveillance using mobile devices and the networked potential of social media. This case highlights a number of issues around sport events, media and oppositional narratives that are of interest here. First, though risking their personal freedom by storming the physical event space, this group captured the attention of the international media, disrupting their editorial focus on the sporting spectacle (Burchell, 2015). Second, their commitment to document each element of the performance, including their arrest mean that they secured extensive media attention that further extended the reach of their message that influenced eventual changes in legislation in Russia following the Games and amendments to the IOCs own guidelines. Finally, as Burchell (2015, p.669) concludes, their "storming of the Olympic platform responded in kind to the coordinated control of media and physical spaces used to construct the very narrative they sought to challenge". This example drawn from the Sochi (2014) Winter Olympic Games builds on the experiences Giulianotti, Armstrong, Haylse and Hobbs (2015) recount around the London 2012 Olympic Games. They highlight how oppositional groups used two main techniques to hijack the event platform. First, they provide an example of the Critical Mass cycle ride that took place on the evening of the Opening Ceremony and suggest this was one act of transgression by a neo-tribal formation – a loose coalition – focused on "spontaneous and informal forms of protest or transgression in prominent social settings" (p111). Second, they highlight a number of what they call situationist spectacles that sought to use techniques of detournement to produce critical or radical messages about the event project, sponsor activities and the impact of the Games on the local area. Giulianotti et al (2015) also comment on the weaknesses of anti-Olympic groups and their public profile and the ease with which their activities (in physical space) were diverted to marginal locations. Whilst acknowledging the relative success of Games Monitor and the Counter Olympic Network (CON) in providing a consistent critique of the Olympic movement, they suggest that being more embedded in local campaigns and issues could have produced more effective ways of securing public attention. As they conclude, "if critical forces are to enhance their impacts, it

is important that they engage fully with a wide cross-section of critics at community and national levels while also seeking to avoid peripheral spaces for the location of public protests" (p116).

Releasing voices: Citizen media and the event platform

Until now the focus of discussion has been to highlight the prevailing debates taking place around sport events in an age increasingly transformed by the affordances of digital and social media. I have suggested that whilst the event platform can be a powerful ally to those governing agencies and their partners in the public-private growth coalitions often formed to bid for and delivery major sporting events, the platform can also be hijacked, seized or become the site of dissent – offline and online. I now focus more on the possibilities brought by digital and social media to potentially decentralise, empower, mobil(e)ise and organise (Hands, 2011), focused on primary research conducted around around two major sport events – the London 2012 Olympic Games and the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. When used effectively in the hands of a powerful networked public (boyd, 2014), I suggest that the effective mobilisation of digital and social media can enable challenge to established sources of knowledge and authority (e.g. corporate sport media and sanctioning bodies), providing a platform for alternative narratives to be heard, particularly when a cacophony of voices are released. I draw on two practice-research examples to illustrate what can be achieved (and their limitations) when a decentralised and distributed structure is created with citizen participation at its heart. Fundamental to success is enabling heterogeneous actors to utilise their existing capacities and networks to amplify messages through a shared communication platform.

The first example relates to a practice-research project, *#citizenrelay* which used a hybrid media environment, including blogs and social media, to mobilise, organise and discuss issues pertaining to the Olympic Torch Relay as it meandered its way through Scotland in the early part of the summer of 2012, before the start of the London 2012 Olympic Games. This creative project was designed to train and support a cadre of what we might call 'citizen journalists' to cover the Olympic Torch Relay itself. It also sought to involve a wider public to contribute their own stories taking advantage of the affordances of digital and social media in the form of videos, photographs, blog posts, and social media collateral. The project did not intentionally seek to reach the most marginalised members of society, but it did attempt to

ameliorate some of the barriers (whether in terms of equipment or capacity or competency) to access that prevents people from participating in the creation of media. It sought to promote the possibility of creating and producing media on the basis that "digital infrastructures offer citizens new channels for speaking and acting together and thus lower the threshold for involvement" (Bakardjieva et al, 2012, p.i). In following the Olympic Torch Relay, the *#citizenrelay* project drew attention to the intensely corporate platform that it has come to represent. As Frew & McGillivray (2013) stress, "the Olympic torch relay is a mobile spectacle that can…be associated with an extension of Brand Olympic to places and spaces (buildings, landmarks and landscapes) previously out of reach of the tentacles of brandscaping" (p. 237). Whereas the mainstream media coverage of the Olympic Torch Relay was celebratory, emphasising its core values and symbolic qualities, the *#citizenrelay* citizen journalists drew attention to the corporate sponsor nominated torchbearers, the extent of corporate management of each leg of the tour (including sharing interviews with disgruntled local officials 'gagged' by LOCOG (the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games) and highlighting the costs associated with 'dressing' destinations to welcome the entourage. Because of its focus on the hyper-local and a commitment to a more bottom-up, place-specific and rooted agenda (McGillivray, 2014) mediated via a single web space, the project garnered the attention of the mainstream media. This interest led to some of the stories generated by citizen witnesses (Allan, 2013) being given coverage on national channels – at a small level, reinforcing the possibility of seizing or hijacking the event platform. Non-specialist media practitioners were given training in digital storytelling techniques (audio interviews, photography, video and social media) and shown how to act as media makers, amplifying their content in real time. 60 reporters were networked via an online blog and social media channels to produce "a rich, diverse, ironic, provocative and playful representation of the Olympic torch relay event over the course of seven days in the summer of 2012" (Frew & McGillivray 2013, p. 239). The experience of *#citizenrelay* as a researcher-practitioner provided insights into the (over) produced nature of the event platform. It highlighted just how powerful the messages projected by official media 'partners' were in emphasising inclusion, benevolence and, most markedly, joyous national unity. Yet ultimately, the Olympic Torch Relay is a very expensive event paid for by the host nation that imposes a prescriptive event format on local organisers in order to provide the conditions for sponsor activation and stage managed, easily consumable media events. As Frew and McGillivray (2013) have suggested:

> in official parlance, the 'activation convey' (i.e. brand activation) was given a prime position, relegating the symbolically important 'flame convoy' to the background. Handing out merchandise on the way the activation convoy operated as a noisy, colourful procession of product promotion, a vivid encapsulation of the Corporate Olympic Games during this oft-cited 'community event' (p. 242).

Returning to Price's (2008) comments on the ways that Olympic assets are protected, these include security, accreditation and "assertion of intellectual property and contractual rights" (p. 89). It was clear from the *#citizenrelay* project how brand activation was protected by LOCOG and by the law enforcement agencies in each local authority the relay travelled through. Though a much more geographically dispersed event platform than Burchell's (2015) example of Pussy Riot in Sochi, the self-same practices of surveillance, securitisation and implementation of a "militarized media strategy" (p. 670) was evident in the Olympic Torch Relay. The small project also demonstrated that established media gatekeepers can be circumnavigated when there is the will and the wherewithal, especially with power of first-hand, real-time coverage and non-hegemonic interpretations (Bakardjieva, et al, 2012). That is not to say that occupying an oppositional space was comfortable. Frequently, during the *#citizenrelay* project the gaze of official Games organisers was evident. Questions posed to the project team revolved around who had the right to be a journalist (accreditation issues), what issues the public could legitimately comment upon (and where) and, finally, what protocols were in place to ensure there were no infringements to the rights of official media partners and event sponsors.

The second example that illustrates the varying potential of the event platform to enable or constrain alternative narratives to be released is a project, *Digital Commonwealth*, that provided a creative response to the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. This practice-research project included nearly one thousand participants from across Scotland, producing over three hundred unique digital media artefacts, including video, audio, blogs and social media outputs (McGillivray, McPherson, Jones & McCandlish, 2015). A diverse range of individuals and communities from across Scotland (schools, community groups, marginalised populations) were involved. Crucial to this practice-research project was the encouragement and facilitation of "everyday, practical forms of critical digital citizenship" (McGillivray et al, 2015, p.7) foregrounding self-direction, creativity and recognising the existing assets of people and communities. Thinking through 'making and doing' was at the heart of the project, facilitated by a group of creative practitioners and supported by the co-production of

a series of digital media workshops and an open access digital storytelling resource made available to participants and a broader public (i.e. educational authorities and community groups) beyond the completion of the project. The project had at its heart a number of core guiding principles that included: the *common good* – supporting communities (particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged and not well represented in mainstream media) to have a voice through self generated media and creative practice; *ownership* – where possible, participants should host their own content and retain ownership of it; *collaboration* – from the partners involved in delivery to the participants working together to produce creative content; *sharing* – open media for non commercial use, including technology, design ideas and Creative Commons licenses; *accessibility* – in terms of the tools and technologies used to generate content and ensuring that as few obstacles as possible were put in the way of individuals and groups getting involved as content creators, and; *archiving* – by producing digital enabled content, project outputs will contribute to a larger archive of community-generated materials produced around the Commonwealth Games.

Acknowledging the often exclusive (and exclusionary) technological landscape that digital and social media represents for many, the project worked closely to enhance the digital competencies and capacities of those least likely to participate in online activity – in the hope that their voices could be more effectively heard in the narratives of the Commonwealth Games when they came around. As Danielsson (2011) has stressed, it is important not to presume that digital spaces are inherently democratic, or that so-called digital natives will be the ones to challenge existing power relations. He also stresses that "digital media are contextually appropriated…these appropriations are structurally enabled and constrained". He calls for greater attention to be paid to the unevenness of access to and use of digital media and an acknowledgement that differences in class and habitus are "embodied and (subjectively) sensed" (p.58). The *Digital Commonwealth* project addressed these differences by recognising that, firstly, class, age, ethnic origin and other demographic factors impact on attitudes towards, participation in, and outputs from digital and social media. Whereas its predecessor, *#citizenrelay*, had sought to test the power of digital platforms to network a disparate public around the sport event platform (in that case the Olympic Torch Relay), it did so with the participation of those already (to an extent) relatively comfortable in their use of technologies and tools. Those people who generated 20000 website hits, the 7000 multiplier relationship networks and produced the 500 videos and short audio podcasts found

it exhilarating to participate in a one-off, dynamic and creative event but it was never intended that durable digital dispositions would be an outcome.

In contrast, the *Digital Commonwealth* project was designed to support those on the margins to develop their skills and competences and arm them with a set of creative means of voicing their stories. Though there was space for participants to communicate ideas oppositional to the dominant institutional Games narrative, for many they were more concerned with learning how to navigate the media landscape and enhance their digital media literacies for future use. Whilst both practice-research projects had significant limitations in terms of how we might assess their long-term impact, both provide support for the idea that "assemblages of numerous physically located but also globally networked individuals" (Burchell, 2015, p.663) can provide a powerful antidote to draw the attention of the established media. Moreover, they also provide a legacy, whereby the connections, networks, and issue-based agendas continue to exist – given sustenance by the focus of the event platform but living on beyond its temporal limitations.

Conclusion

The affordances of digital and social media do not represent a panacea, where dominant narratives are contested in each and every circumstance and with demonstrable success. There remains a need for much more research that takes as its focus the longer-term outcomes associated with protest and dissent and their online mediation around major sporting events. Indeed, Jones & McGillivray have argued elsewhere that protests (online and offline) have themselves become events in themselves but we require methods that help us understand from the inside and quantitatively what impact mediated protests has on the governing authorities responsible for exploiting their tightly controlled media event platform to extend capital accumulation processes.

However, in this paper I argue that there is growing evidence of a more participatory media landscape providing the conditions for the formation, and global linking of, productive, creative and sustainable networks formed to shine a light on, or as an outcome of, major event excesses (Pavoni, 2015). The two cases I have highlighted in the patter part of the paper here represent small, localised responses to much more significant, increasingly globalised movements but they also have some commonalities with the protest and dissent movements

we have seen emerge in Beijing, Vancouver, London, Rio and Sochi in recent years. Like those involved in new media activism activities, they sought to use the tools and techniques appropriated by the mainstream media to draw attention to the excesses, abuses, corruptions and amplification of neo-liberal logics associated with major sport events. However, it would be foolhardy to over-estimate the impact of digital and social media platforms in altering the power imbalances that accompany major sporting events. Intimations of digital disruption do not, unproblematically, equate to a panacea of protest (Jones & McGillivray, 2013). Attempts to hold existing power holders to account are never without their limitations. There is evidence, for example, of the (successful) appropriation of new media by the corporate-sport-media complex, including event sponsors, destination marketers, and broadcasters to utilise the "massive media attention and cultural space occupation of major sport events" (Rowe, 2014, p.756) to pursue commercial imperatives. Furthermore, as Aslan et al (2015) have suggested, influential journalist and media institutions remain the primary definers within the media event arc.

Yet, since 2012 we have seen a number of high profile major event bidding contests collapse, - aided and abetted by popular grassroots movements and facilitated by the strategic and tactical use of digital and social media messaging. Those existing power holders within the event space now have to give greater consideration to how their public pronouncements will play out on platforms that they find more difficult to control. Narrative control is no longer one-way and uncontested but multi-faceted, fluid, complex and dynamic. The odds remain in favour of the growth coalitions and their event partners, who control the real estate and can impose (contractually) limits on the spaces (physical or online), available to advance alternative narratives. But, at the same time, event sanctioning bodies and prospective event hosts are making concessions to ensure the value of their event platform is maintained.

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